Abstract

Visual-Aural Progression:
One MFA Candidate's Retrospective, 2005-2011

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Director: Tim Lazure

DEPARTMENT OF WOOD DESIGN

Visual-Aural Progression chronicles my five-year journey through the MFA program in Wood Design. This writing showcases my progression as a craftsman through photos of my work and reflections on the reasons, motivations, and sentiments for these endeavors. I went into this journey with only a rudimentary skill set, and have emerged from the other end a professional guitar maker.

Visual-Aural Progression:
One MFA Candidate's Retrospective, 2005-2011

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This thesis is dedicated to my family

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Jessi Braxton and Erica Letchworth: Figures 15-28
Henry James Stindt: Figures 1-4 and 9-13
Author: Figures 5-8

Introduction

This thesis is not really a thesis at all, at least not in the academic sense. I am not arguing an assertion or questioning a convention. Instead, this written work is a descriptive overview of my growth within the MFA program. My objective over the past several years wasn't to create a cohesive body of work that asserts a specific sentiment; rather, I entered this program in order to realize my potential as a craftsman and to develop the necessary skills to become an engaging and effective educator. I firmly believe these should be the core principals of an MFA program.

My journey began in September 2003. I was one year into the MA in Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology program, and was hard at work compiling and analyzing data from a recent summer field project. I was tired but motivated as the project was to be my thesis. I was spending two to three hours a day in the library mulling over shipping records form the 19th century, attending classes, and also working as a teaching assistant. I received a call on the evening of September 7th. My father had died suddenly. He was 50.

At that time, my wife and I were busy but faring pretty well. She was in her last year of school, I was moving forward with my course work, and our second child was due any day. The news of my father's passing was devastating to say the least. He was my closest friend and was an integral part of our family. He was the stabilizing factor when things became too heavy. I spent the next several months sorting through his affairs while also trying to maintain my role as a father and husband. I had two children then and things had become much busier. I all but dropped out of school. I began to reexamine my life. I was 30 years old and was still unsure of what I wanted to do. I had spent four years active duty military, two years on active reserves, two years working as a government contractor, had

been in college for five years, had two kids, and was struggling to finish a Master's program that required more than I could afford to give it. I was also haunted by the austere way my father lived his life. He had many ambitions, but always placed them second. In the end, he missed out on so many of those dreams. I didn't want to do the same thing.

I had always enjoyed working with my hands. I had considered building furniture or guitars for several years but these routes seemed irresponsible, a notion that bore a lot of my father's influence. I decided to investigate furniture making as an option. Throughout 2004, I spent countless hours at the bookstore, and amassed a formidable library of woodworking publications. I built a traditional woodworking bench, outfitted a small garage workshop, and then spun my wheels for a few months. The following spring, I went back to school to catch up on my Maritime Studies classes. I wasn't really motivated but felt the need to finish what I had started. At some point, someone mentioned that there was a wood program over in the art school. I walked over the next day and met Terry Smith. I told him my story and asked if I could sit in on one of his classes. He agreed to let me audit his fall survey class.

The fall class was an extremely positive experience. I made three pieces that semester, and at the suggestion of one of the graduate students I entered two of them into the Rebel 48 student juried show. One won 1st place in Wood Design and the other received and honorable mention. This acknowledgement invigorated my intent to apply to the program. I did and was accepted to start in Fall 2006, but I had to finish my other master's first. I spent the next four months writing the Maritime Studies thesis, and defended in April 2006. I started the Wood Design program the next fall.

The title of this thesis reflects the duality of my work thus far. Accordingly, this work is broken into two sections, which represent two distinct periods in my development. Part I is focused on my furniture, strictly speaking, the visual. The section begins with a short description of my influences and motivations, followed by descriptions and photos of all my furniture pieces from the survey course audit to my final furniture project in 2008. I have tried to concisely convey my intentions for each as well as my retrospective impressions. This represents my furniture experience in its entirety, save two footstools I made in junior high.

Part II focuses on my growth as a luthier or stringed instrument maker. This period is representative of growth in the visual component, i.e. craftsmanship and aesthetics, but is also concerned with the development of tone, or sound quality –the aural – of or relating to the sense of hearing. This section begins with an explanation for my motivations toward guitar making. Descriptions and photos of five guitars follow the introduction. At the time of this writing, I have made 26 guitars. Technically these have all been made during my time as a graduate student, but many have been commissions made after my graduate show. Additionally, not all of the guitars constructed during the MFA program warrant a showcase. I have several skeletons in my guitar closet.

Part I: *Furniture*

When I audited the Wood Design survey course in 2005 I was trying to figure out how I should approach woodworking. I had amassed what I thought was a good knowledgebase of technique from woodworking books and magazines over the previous two years, but most of that knowledge was untested. I had no real skill set. I was also unsure of what woodworking should mean to me. I knew that I didn't want to build and install cabinets for a living. I also knew that I didn't want to waste my time making knick-knacks or the like. I felt that something more personally meaningful could be found.

My first boost of guided inspiration came from the book, *The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking,* by James Krenov. This was the first woodworking book I read that argued the importance of thinking beyond the mere aspect of visual craft. Krenov's writing was full of insight and sentiment. The texts I had previously read were great at describing the "how", but none addressed the "why". I began to grasp what I had been missing.

The last several years had been a frenzied attempt to sort out my feelings of loss. They had also been stuffed with hopes of finding myself. When my father passed, I found myself torn between childhood and adulthood. Sure I was an adult in form. I had a wife, two kids, and was in a stringent graduate program that offered all of the trappings of an esoteric, self-absorbed, academic life. Wasn't that what an adult was supposed to be? I woke one day with the realization that I actually hadn't ever really dealt with the idea of what it means to be an adult. With my father now gone, it was apparent that I had kept myself in his shadow. Life had been easy because there was always someone there that could bail me out. In short, although I had been going through the motions of what seemed to be the correct, mature path, I was really nothing more than a child skirting by on luck

and my father's ever-present support. When this realization surfaced, I understood that merely doing something that I derived a modicum of pleasure from was not enough. I needed to find a life path that would challenge me mentally and physically while also inciting deeper philosophical and spiritual connections. Simply learning to craft elegant furniture was not going to be enough. I needed to find and develop a personal connection to the process not the finished work, in order to become whole. Krenov's writing initiated this necessary perspective shift.

I also became inspired by the clean, simple Krenovian aesthetic. The visual beauty of his work and the work of his students reflected both sensitivity and refinement. I started the Wood Design program armed with an idealistic vision. I fueled this internal idealism by reading more of Krenov's writings and trying to interpret his sentiments in my work. I also read George Nakashima's, *The Soul of a Tree*, and chewed on Robert Pirsig's, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* for several months. The concerns expressed in these works regarding sensitivity, quality, and personal connection with process were inspirational. I decided that craft should supplant design, as craft was the connection I had to my work. Craft encapsulated my reasoning, sensitivity, and abilities; whereas design represented the connection everyone else could have with my work. The latter was really of no concern, as it held little sway over the fulfillment I derived from my process. I certainly hoped that the objects I created would be well received, but I didn't want to sacrifice the experience for the reception.

The following pages contain examples of my attempt to evolve a craft that maintains this idealistic notion. These works represent my struggle to develop a useable skill set while still trying to capture my sentiments. None of these pieces truly express my idealistic

vision, as a true representation is likely impossible. Idealism has to hold up to the test of reality and the latter seems to always have the upper hand. That being said, this grouping of work is representative of the process not the result.

Purple Leaf

Purple Leaf was constructed for the sole purpose of trying my hand at bent lamination. In fact, it started as a free-form task building exercise and only later morphed into a coherent end product. This was my first work within the Wood Design department, and was actually made while auditing an undergraduate survey course.

The piece began by clamping several steamed strips of purpleheart and spruce into a basic two-part form. This formed the main arm and the bottom curve. The exposed strip ends were clamped and twisted into a gentle outward curve. A recycled bicycle inner tube was wrapped around the slats to bind them together while they cooled into the desired shape. The whole process was repeated with glue. Once dry, a 4" section was cut from the twisted end of the laminated arm, and re-attached perpendicularly with a wedged mortise and tenon joint. The arm assemblage was then shaped and sanded. The resultant twisting, upward reaching arms resembled a tree branch crotch. A leaf seemed an obvious choice to place within the branches. The leaf was made by cutting a purpleheart board into three sections and gluing the sections back together with thin spruce strips sandwiched in between. The spruce strips are meant to imply veins while also referencing the branching of the arm assemblage.

In retrospect, I am generally happy with this piece, as it was my introductory work in wood design. In a way, I made *Purple Leaf* in a directionless effort to feel my out my potential. I hadn't made anything of the sort before and went about the project at home without any real input from others. This piece received an honorable mention in the Rebel 48 student show. The acknowledgement helped point me toward applying to the MFA program.

Figure 1: *Purple Leaf,* 2005.

Light Boxes

Light Boxes was my second endeavor in the Wood Design department and was also made while auditing the undergraduate survey course. Like *Purple Leaf,* this piece is based around technique building. I wanted to experiment with feather-splined miter joints. The original design was incomplete. I had only considered the ten concentric spiraling boxes by the time I started, and work came to a stand still once the base was completed. Several options were tried for the top before I settled on the two expanding mitered boxes. The class suggested I put a light inside so I shaped a piece of cherry and suspended a small halogen lamp from underneath. The light assemblage was attached to the inside of the uppermost box and oriented downward. The result is diffuse light that emanates almost evenly from all openings. At this stage, the top was still bare so I fashioned an interlocking lattice of cherry, and let it into slots cut into the top's perimeter. Light radiating from the lattice mimics the broken diffuse light visible throughout the piece.

Light Boxes is probably the simplest piece I have made, but is also one of my favorites. The twisting base combined with the lighted negative spaces creates a complex, visual dynamic. The heavy base draws the eye in and encourages the viewer to follow the spiral upwards to the top and once there, gaze for a moment at the light emanating from the dark cherry lattice. The light is diffused in such a way that the lamp works well in both dark and lighted rooms. This piece won first place in Wood Design, during the same Rebel 48 show. These two credits convinced me to apply to the MFA in Wood Design, and also focused my resolve toward finishing the other Master's program I was currently enrolled in. It was a win-win situation to say the least.

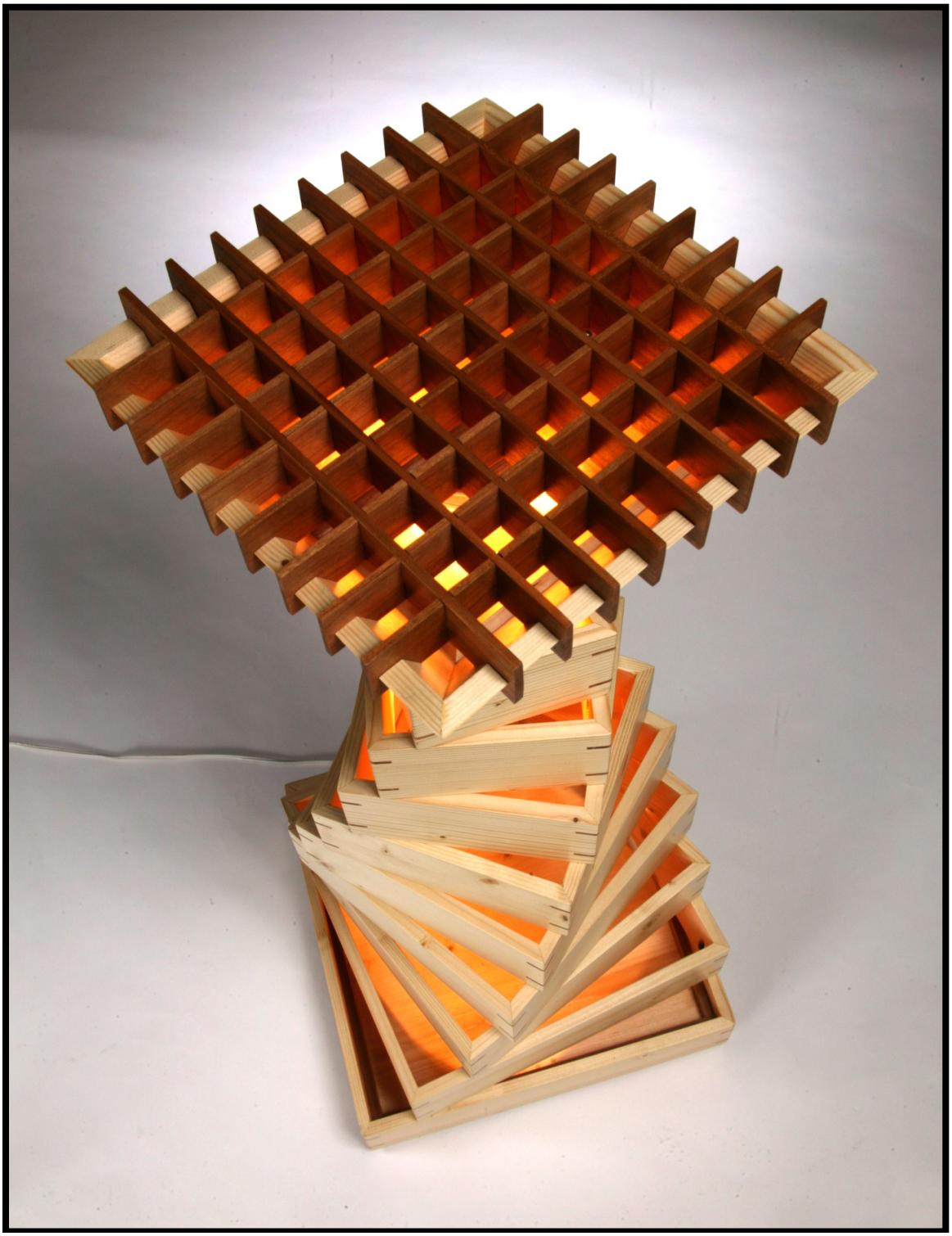

Figure 2: *Light Boxes,* 2005.

Special Occasion

Special Occasion was my first attempt at building a James Krenov inspired cabinet. Quaint, freestanding cabinets are a hallmark of Krenovian design and I had been chomping at the bit to try my hand at such a work. Additionally, I had just finished reading George Nakashima's, *The Soul of a Tree,* and was inspired by his intentional use of imperfect, knotted and cracked wood. I was also motivated to learn hand-cut dovetails as I saw these as the quintessential representation of good woodcraft at that time.

The design concept for this work was quite loose. I knew I wanted to dovetail a cabinet, and I knew I wanted it to sit on an open leg stand. The dovetails were cut and the ambrosia maple cabinet was fitted together. At this point I was unsure of where the design should go. I was flipping through a woodworking magazine one day and saw a how-to article on making freestanding wine bottle holders. These holders were nothing more than an angled piece of wood glued to a base. The upper piece of this simple cantilevered design had a hole in it that cradled the neck of an inverted wine bottle. I decided to incorporate a similar holder and also fashioned a matching wine glass holder. The two were made with thin steam-bent maple boards that were mortised into the cabinet sides.

The existing cabinet doors are actually the third attempt. I initially sidetracked myself into placing design before intent, and the consequence was two awful sets of doors. The final solution is two asymmetrical walnut rail and style doors with glass panels inlayed from the back. The outer edges of each door have been capped with a strip of ambrosia maple to give the illusion that the entire cabinet is maple when viewed from the side. A third strip of ambrosia maple was glued to the inner edge of the larger door in order to

visually define the door connection, and bring together the lighter tone of the cabinet's top and bottom

The base also went through several variations before settling on the one seen in the photo. The base is walnut and maple. The knots in the right front and left rear legs were intentionally included to represent the inherent inconsistency in both the material and in my craft. I wanted the piece to be visually imperfect. The legs are slightly tapered inward in an attempt to lighten the base's visual heaviness. The last component added to the cabinet was the walnut cap.

The cabinet seemed too narrow once it was attached to the base. The base was successful at bringing the eye upward into the midsection and moving it toward the top of the cabinet. Unfortunately, once at the top of the cabinet, the eye was left to keep wandering upward. By adding the walnut cap, the viewer is brought back into the cabinet, which is the intended focal point.

This piece succeeded in marrying my inclinations toward the Krenovian aesthetic with my admiration for Nakashima's natural approach; however, my choice of board thickness was off. At this stage, I hadn't quite realized the negative impact using common wood thickness could have on a piece. For example, the cabinet is constructed of ¾" stock which is all too common. It suggests a production mindset, which was certainly not the intention. By thinning the stock by a mere 1/16", the work would have been lighter and more elegant. It would have offered a more intimate visual connection, which was the intent.

Figure 3: *Special Occasion,* 2006.

Figure 4: *Special Occasion,* Dovetail detail.

Open Heart Paired

This piece followed on the heels of *Special Occasion* and was aimed at a similar end. The objective was an intimate matching table and cabinet that would work well in an entry way or vestibule. In fact, the initial impetus was a need for an entry table to catch my keys as I walked in the front door. I sketched up two separate projects for that semester, the entry table and a wall cabinet. I soon decided the two would work well together as one piece. I was still well entrenched in the aesthetic and philosophical sentiments of Krenov and Nakashima when I designed these two pieces so I tried to convey my interpretation of those sentiments in the design. Additionally, I wanted to further push my skill set by learning new joinery techniques.

White oak was always the intended wood for the main components of the table and cabinet, but several species were considered for the tops and door insert. I went at this project with the intent of using native wood species, and had originally chosen spalted maple for the tops and door insert. However, the maple blended too much with the white oak, and I was afraid the piece would take on a homogenous yellowed hue as it aged. Moving beyond native species opened up myriad options and I waffled widely. At one point, I strongly considered African blackwood, but ultimately rejected that notion because of cost. Padauk seemed like a good choice as it was affordable, would provide a nice red contrast for several years, and would turn to an agreeable brown once it oxidized.

The table was intended to appear delicate while still maintaining useful stability. I have always liked the look of floating tops. I feel the resultant negative space imbues a dynamic that is clean and uncluttered but still inviting. They are aesthetically quiet and relaxing. I decided to float the top to achieve this end. The bottom edges of the padauk top

were beveled upward to create a thin edge along its perimeter. The outer top edges were slightly bowed outward and the stretchers were bowed to compliment. The legs were tapered along their inner faces to convey a light but stable stance. The stretchers were connected to the legs with hand cut and chiseled, haunched mortise and tenon joints. Two wedged tenons were extended completely through one leg to expose the viewer to a sample of the joinery.

The cabinet's carcass was constructed with through mortise and tenon joints that were pinned from the outer edge of the cabinet's base and top. The door was slightly bowed outward to imply its connection to the table, and was partially let into a rabbet in the cabinet sides. The rails and stiles were joined with pinned bridle joints. The cabinet was capped with a piece of padauk shaped to mimic the table's top.

I wanted the cabinet to be open as a way of exalting the ideas of aesthetics and craft over functionality. Additionally, I felt the partially covered door would convey a sense of vulnerability by exposing the generally unseen cabinet interior. The seemingly live edge padauk panel is actually a contrivance. I searched for a suitable live edge panel but to no avail, so I book matched the panel and cut along its wavy grain lines.

Open Heart Paired was a great project. All of the joinery was made with basic hand tools, and challenged by nascent skill set. I gleaned a great deal about proper tool control during this project, and these lessons have proved invaluable over the last several years. This work also helped me to define an aesthetic for my furniture: clean, light, and open.

Figure 5: *Open Heart Paired,* 2006.

Figure 6: *Open Heart Paired,* Table.

Figure 7: *Open Heart Paired,* Leg detail.

Figure 8: *Open Heart Paired,* Cabinet.

Pear Table

Pear Table was conceived as a way to utilize a nice piece of live edge European pear I had sitting in my studio space. I envisioned a hall table or sofa table so set about sketching out variations. I wanted to incorporate elements of the prior two works as a continuation of what seemed my developing aesthetic.

The pear board sits atop an open stand of walnut legs and stretchers. The lower stretchers were made smaller in height to help focus attention toward the connection between the top and stand. Pear was also incorporated as the lower front stretcher. The attenuating stretcher sweeps upward from the front right leg to the front left leg. The idea here was to add a dynamic component to an otherwise static base. This proved to be a nightmare as the pear stretcher was mated to the inner tapering surface of the legs. This made the made joinery difficult and caused the stand to flex. Additionally, I used dowels to join the other stretchers to the legs. This choice only added to the frustration. I ended up screwing the pear stretcher in from both sides and covering the screws with pear plugs. I wasn't happy with the choice of screws but it tightened up the joint and removed the flex.

I departed from the norm on this piece by using a top that doesn't completely cover the perimeter of the base. Response to this choice was mixed. Many didn't like the idea of a tabletop that didn't completely cover its base. It was interesting to see how changing a convention could stir negative responses, in an art school no less! I was happy with the overall look of the piece but have always been embarrassed of the joinery. The process of trying to fit seven straight stretchers, one curved stretcher that made everything want to twist, and four legs together was tough. The resultant sloppiness of the joints was frustrating and demoralizing. Oh well, such is life.

Figure 9: *Pear Table,* 2008.

Figure 10: *Pear Table,* Leg detail.

Table

Table was the final piece of furniture I constructed in the wood design department. By the time I started this piece, I was completely immersed in the world of guitar making and knew I likely wouldn't look back. The principal of my son's school asked me to donate something for a school-sponsored fund raising auction. I agreed to donate a piece of furniture, but needed to make something in a fairly short period of time.

The design of *Table* is really simple and straight forward, yet this is probably my favorite piece of furniture. I was in a stressful and somewhat unfocused place when I made this piece, and the simple straight lines and spaces are symbolic of the order I was searching for on a personal level. Like *Pear Table,* this was also intended to be a hall or sofa table. The base is similar to *Pear Table,* but the stretchers were kept straight. The upper stretchers are taller than the bottoms but the height difference is not as drastic as *Pear Table.* Walnut was used for the lower front stretcher in order to define the table's front. The other stretchers and legs are ash. I had learned my lesson from the last project and the joinery was changed. The stretchers were mortised into the legs, and were secured by draw-bored pins. The pins pulled the stretcher tenons in tightly. The result: tight joints that would have held without any glue!

The top is a walnut slab, split down the center. This piece of walnut was perfect for this table as the outer edges are both sap wood, and work to bring in the lighter tone of the ash legs. The top's underside is beveled to create a lighter visual weight, and to open up line of sight into the base. This creates an illusion that the top's perimeter is smaller than that of the base. In actuality, they are the same.

Table was my MFA furniture swan song. Though the overall design is simple and restrained, the cleanliness of its lines and tightness of its joinery served to reinforce a personal confidence in my handcraft abilities. This piece sums up what I had been working toward in the program with regards to furniture: a clean, airy aesthetic that expresses my desire to use the material in a quiet but insightful way.

Figure 11: *Table,* 2008.

Figure 12: *Table,* Leg and stretcher detail.

Figure 13: *Table,* Top and leg detail.

Part II: *Guitars*

My interest in guitars goes back over twenty years. I was fifteen when I got my first guitar from a local pawnshop. I immediately began butchering great classic rock tunes while conjuring up visions of rock and roll stardom. The guitar has been a continual part of my life ever since. My interest in guitar making goes back to 1996. That year marked one year since I was discharged from the military, and one year since I had started traveling the country installing computer network systems for the government. I spent a lot of time in hotels that year. I distinctly remember working in Baltimore that winter. The days were long, but I was bored out of my mind at night. I jumped in the rental car one evening and found a bookstore. I was meandering around the store when I noticed a book with a beautiful guitar plastered across the cover. It was an archtop jazz guitar. The book was titled, *Making and Archtop Guitar,* by Robert Benedetto. I bought it. I read the book cover-to-cover that evening. I went back to the same store the next day and purchased another book, *Guitarmaking: Tradition and Technology,* by William R. Cumpiano and Jonathan D. Natelson. I spent the rest of my evenings in Baltimore reading these books over and over. I also began devising a plan to become a guitar maker. Unfortunately, life got in the way. I didn't attempt to make a guitar for eleven years.

I made my first guitar in the spring of 2007 as part of a graduate studio class. I made my second the following summer. Since then, I have made 24 more guitars. This past year has seen my transition from an amateur guitar maker to a professional luthier. At the time of this writing, I maintain a one and a half yearlong waiting list of commissioned instruments. This evolution has been challenging. Building a successful guitar goes beyond the tenets of good craftsmanship. The successful guitar maker is not only tasked with

producing a visually pleasing object, he or she is also responsible for creating a sonically beautiful instrument. One does not necessarily beget the other. There are many beautiful guitars in the world with lousy tone. Conversely, there are also many ugly guitars with elegant nuanced voices. For a young luthier like myself, I don't have the option of making one or the other. To be competitive, I have to create an aesthetically superior instrument with first-rate tone.

I make guitars for players. My intention is to build an instrument that a professional player is willing to use for his or her own career. Creating an instrument with great tone can't be done willy-nilly either. It is possible for any builder to produce a great sounding guitar, but if that sound can't be re-produced then that builder hasn't achieved a necessary standard. Reputation doesn't come from one guitar. I have spent the last several years trying to tease out incredible tone from my guitars. Accordingly, I have sought input from several sources. In addition to my coursework, I attended a three-week long guitar making class, and spent another week, one-on-one with a prominent guitar and mandolin maker. Both of these workshops were a tremendous help. I have also sought out criticism from working guitarists, and traveled throughout the country interviewing guitar makers. All of these endeavors make up the knowledgebase I draw from. I have made some significant gains over the last few years, but am always trying to make a better instrument. I still have much to learn.

The following pages contain a sample of my instruments. I tried to include only those instruments that were made in direct connection with the school. I have, however, included one instrument at the end that was made as a commission. This was done to show a representation of where my progression through the MFA has taken me. The

descriptions in the following pages use terminology that may be unfamiliar to non-guitarists, so I have included an exploded guitar diagram below for reference.

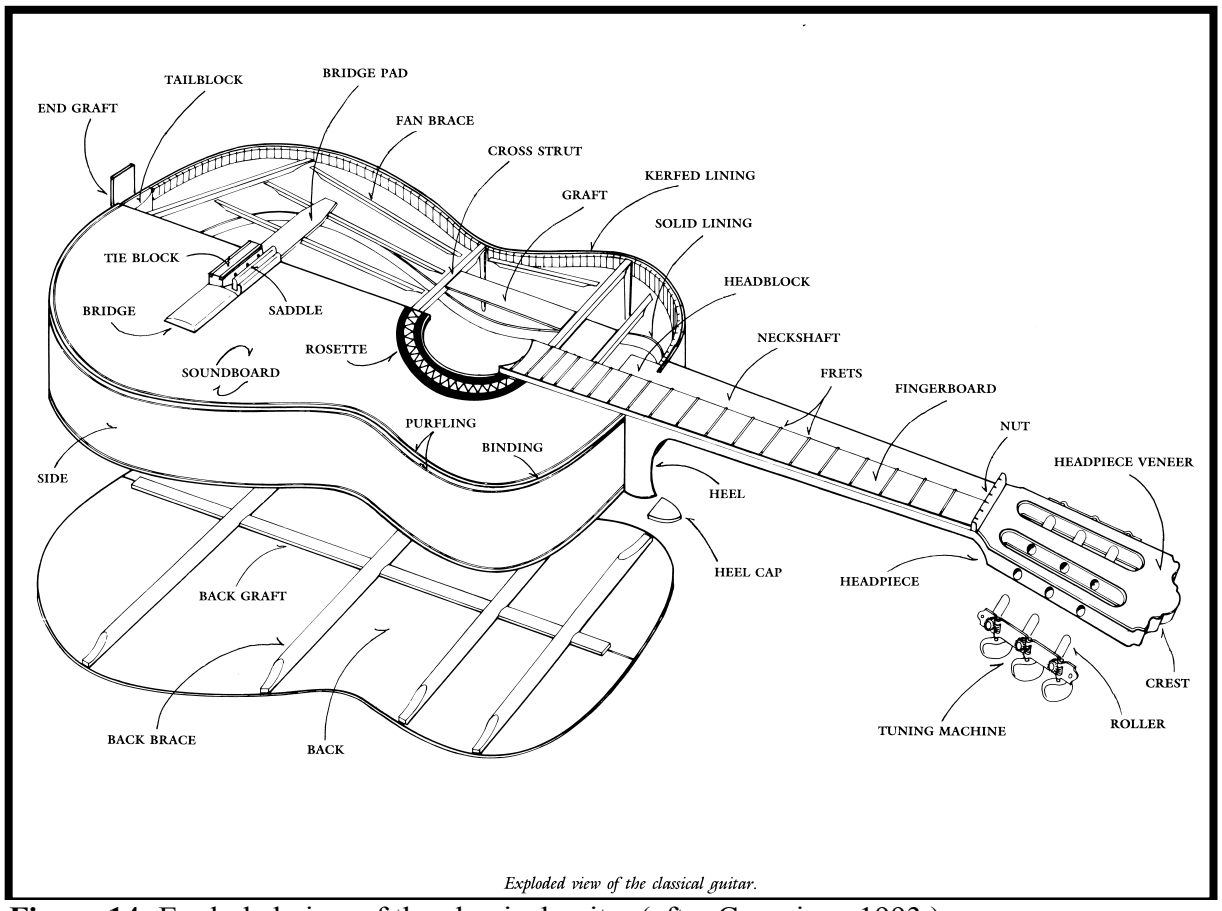

Figure 14: Exploded view of the classical guitar (after Cumpiano 1993.)

Number One

As the name implies, *Number One,* was my first guitar. It was constructed in the Fall of 2007. I relied heavily on Robert Benedetto's, *Making an Archtop Guitar* for this build. It is fitting that I started my career path as a luthier with this book as it was the first publication I purchased regarding guitar making, and it had spent the majority of the previous ten years on or near my nightstand.

Archtops are the workhorses for jazz guitarists. They were originally designed to be loud, powerfully projecting guitars. They came about prior to amplification, and had to produce enough volume to cut through the other instruments in a jazz band. They are punchy and aggressive when played hard, but are milky smooth and mellow when played softly. Archtop guitars are built in a similar manner to violins. The top and back plates are carved both inside and out. Also like violins, the backs and sides are usually European maple, and the tops are generally made of European spruce. Most archtop necks are hard maple.

I chose to use these traditional materials for this guitar and built it in the traditional manner. Both of the plates were carved by hand using a small homemade rounded bottom handplane. The process was tiring and the rear of the plane blade created a nice set of blisters on my hand. Some makers use large gouges to hog out most of the wood when performing this operation, but I didn't have a gouge. I was also using rather expensive tone woods so the carving process was slow and methodical. I couldn't afford to start again if I had made a careless mistake. The sides were bent by hand over a steam pipe. This is an art in itself. The wetted wood needs to be moved at just the right speed and with the correct amount of pressure to achieve a good bend. There is no way to learn

this from a book. I broke three sets of sides before getting a descent set, but even this set has a repaired crack (I have since switched to a bending fixture that helps alleviate this problem, but still do occasionally bend by hand). The neck was made by laminating three pieces of figured hard maple together with black veneer lines in between. The body was bound with ebony, and the head was capped with ebony. The bridge, tailpiece, and freeboard are also ebony. The guitar was finished with French polished shellac.

This was an incredible introduction to guitar making. Carving the top and back plates was a rewarding task that I had been looking forward to for a long time. Like mentioned in the introduction to this section, the idea of making an archtop guitar had been stirring around in my mind for ten years, but I was only concerned with this one guitar at the time of this project, and had no grand ambition to be a guitar maker. However, by the time I finished this instrument, I was hooked! I made six more guitars over the next year, and all but turned my back on furniture making.

Figure 15: *Number One,* 2007.

Figure 16: *Number One,* Back.

Koa-Koa

Koa-Koa was my seventh guitar. I had been itching to make a smaller bodied steel string guitar at the time, and had a nice set of Hawaiian koa on hand. Koa is an attractive wood species that is native to the Hawaiian islands. It is much sought after as it is harvested in limited quantities. Koa is the traditional wood used in ukulele construction, but has become a common wood choice on high-end guitars.

I tried to compliment this wood set by using a classical shape over that of a typical steel string. The shape of a guitar is not arbitrary. The location of the bridge is important for good tone production, and the body shape dictates where the bridge is ultimately placed. For example, classical guitars necks generally connect to the body at the twelfth fret, which is the midpoint of the string's length – halfway between the nut and saddle (see Figuren14). By connecting the neck to the body at the twelfth fret, the bridge is placed near the center of the lower bout[1]. This means that the lower bout is more evenly activated when the guitar is played. Steel string guitars often connect to the body at the fourteenth fret. This moves the bridge up and away from the center lower bout. This shift changes the guitar's dynamics. To compensate for this, steel string guitars often have short, squatty upper bouts and huge lower bouts. I really don't like this look.

For *Koa-Koa* I wanted to keep the looks of a classical guitar body so I used my classical template as a guide but narrowed the upper bout by approximately ½". This was an aesthetic choice. Classical guitar necks are wider than steel string necks. While the upper bout of my classical shape looks right with a wide classical neck, it would have

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[1] The shape of a guitar is similar to an hourglass. The narrow midsection is called the waist, and the two larger sections are called the bouts. The neck attaches to the upper bout. The bridge is located on the lower bout.

looked ungainly with a narrower neck. Additionally, the koa selected for the top had an intriguing flowing grain pattern that worked better with the narrower shape. The book matched top created a pattern that mimicked the elliptical shape a fallen branch leaves on a tree trunk. This pattern occurred where the soundhole should be so I tried to compliment this by making and elliptical soundhole. The inner edge of the soundhole is bound with a thin piece of wenge, to better define its edge. The outer perimeter is also bound with wenge, and wenge was used for the headplates and the tuner knobs. The neck is black ash. This instrument was finished with French polished shellac. The grain was left unfilled.

Since I had used the classical shape I wasn't able to connect the neck to the body at the fourteenth fret or the bridge would have been too far from the center of the lower bout. I also didn't want to connect it at the twelfth so I chose the thirteenth. This is quite uncommon, but it works to give the player better access to the upper frets while still facilitating good bridge placement. This decision worked well on this guitar both aesthetically and tonally.

This guitar sits in my house and is often within arms reach. The use of Koa for both top and back was initially chosen for aesthetic reasons. In fact, I was hesitant on this choice as guitars with koa tops are often hit or miss with regards to tone. I was pleasantly surprised as this guitar offers all of the clear, articulate characteristics of koa while still maintaining a bold bass response. This guitar is quite well balanced.

Figure 17: *Koa-Koa,* 2008.

Figure 18: *Koa-Koa,* 2008. Back.

Las Hermanas

Las Hermanas were my thirteenth and fourteenth guitars. These were the first two guitars based on the classical design that has helped me launch my career. The impetus for these two instruments was threefold. First, I was fielding several requests to make a classical guitar with a raised fingerboard; that is, a fingerboard that extends above the plane of the guitar top. Since classical guitar necks meet the body at the twelfth fret, a raised fingerboard allows the player's hand to access the higher frets beyond the body joint. I had been avoiding this request, as I wasn't confident enough in my guitar making skills to attempt such a large structural change; however, raised fingerboards have become increasingly more common on modern classical guitars so I figured I needed to attempt it. The second reason for making these guitars was experimental. Different woods affect an instrument's tonal characteristics. This is especially true with regards to a guitar top. A guitar's top is responsible for the lion's share of the instrument's tone or voice. The two traditional choices for classical guitar tops are spruce and western red cedar. Many descriptions can be found touting the merits of one over the other. The problem is I had no real way to articulate the differences they impart on my guitars, as I had not made two guitars that were otherwise identical beyond their tops. When I made *Las Hermanas* I did my best to select wood that was as close as possible. The backs and sides are both Amazon rosewood, presumably cut from the same tree, the necks were cut back to back from the same billet of Spanish cedar, the headstocks were cut from the same billet and so on and so forth. In fact, I milled all of my bracing stock extra long and cut each piece down the center, leaving one half for the first guitar and the other part for the second guitar. The third

reason for this build was my desire to get a local guitar duo to put down their $4,000 guitars and play mine instead.

Las Hermanas were successful in all three ways. The raised fingerboard has become a mainstay of my classical guitars. In fact, I haven't made a traditional styled classical guitar since. The raised fingerboard has gone through a few revisions since then, but these changes have only made it better and more stable. As for the tonal comparison experiment, I was able to glean a better understanding of how each of the two top woods affects the guitar's sound. In regards to the third reason for these guitars, they have become the go to instruments for the guitar duo mentioned above.

I couldn't have asked for a better outcome from these two guitars. I learned a lot about teasing tone from a pile of wood. I began to better understand what makes a classical guitar successful. Additionally, my skill set and confidence in construction techniques greatly improved. Not only did these two guitars satisfy my reasons for making them, they also mark the point at which I ceased to be an amateur builder.

Figure 19: *Las Hermanas,* 2009.

Figure 20: *Las Hermanas,* Head detail.

Figure 21: *Las Hermanas,* Spruce-top back detail.

Figure 22: *Las Hermanas,* Cedar -top back detail.

Verde

Verde was made to be part of my graduate show. It was my fifteenth guitar. I felt that I needed a few electric guitars to display my versatility with guitar construction. This particular guitar was finished two weeks before the show started. I employed the help of Ben "Stike" Stikeleather of Rowyco Kustoms guitar finishing to lay down the translucent green UV cure finish. I wanted a factory-esque finish and didn't have the tools or knowhow to pull the finish off. Because of the time constraints associated with my upcoming show, having Stike apply the finish freed me up to complete another project.

With regards to design, this guitar is based off the iconic Fender Stratocaster, although I departed from the traditional Stratocaster in a number of ways. The primary difference is wood choice. I used African mahogany for the back and capped it with a highly figured piece of soft maple. Stratocasters are generally made of much lighter alder or swamp ash. The mahogany creates a thicker sustain, but adds weight to the instrument. Another difference is the neck construction. I decided on a two-part neck: separate neck and headstock. Stratocaster necks are usually made of one piece of flat sawn maple. This approach helped Fender speed up production and also decreased construction costs; however, I believe it is an inferior design. By making a two-piece neck, I was able to use a much more stable piece of quartersawn maple. By angling the headstock back from the neck plane, string tension is more uniform. This adds to the instrument's tone and sustain. The third departure was the recessed cutaway at the neck heel-body connection. The typical Stratocaster neck joint doesn't have the recessed area behind the neck joint, nor does it use recessed screws for mounting. Instead, a Stratocaster usually employs a

rectangular metal plate and woodscrews. The back of *Verde*'s neck joint is much more functional and aesthetically pleasing.

I didn't hold back on the appointments when I made this guitar. I have always loved the sound and feel of Stratocasters and felt this was my chance to make my dream electric guitar. The changes I implemented were all for personal reasons. From this perspective, *Verde* surpassed my expectations, but if I were to do it all over again I would change one thing: neck shape. The shape of a guitar neck can make or break an instrument's success. If it feels awkward to play, it won't get played. In my opinion the neck on this guitar is too thin. However, most of the players who have tried this guitar disagree with me on this point.

Figure 23: *Verde,* 2009.

Figure 24: *Verde,* Back.

Figure 25: *Verde,* Head detail.

Figure 26: *Verde,* Neck joint detail.

Scroll Bass

Like *Verde, Scroll Bass* (number sixteen) was also constructed in the weeks leading up to my graduate show. I had been tinkering with the idea of making a fretless bass for several months. I drew the bass up full scale so that I could work out a useable shape for the body. The scroll was a loose gesture toward the traditional scroll heads found on upright basses and other viol family instruments.

This instrument went together pretty easy. The body was made from a discarded walnut Windsor chair seat blank and some hard maple. The neck is hard maple. The scroll was the only major challenge. I couldn't conceive of a way to pull off the scroll with a band saw or hand tools. I decided to have a routing template made. It turned out that one of the undergraduate students had access to a laser cutter, so I had my drawing scanned and converted to a CAD drawing. I sent the CAD drawing to this undergrad's uncle and received a template back several days later. The routing operation went smooth.

I included this instrument because I think it is one of the more interesting looking guitars I have made. However, I have the least personal connection to this instrument. I didn't enjoy the process much because it felt like an assembly line product. Having the drawing turned to a CAD file by one person, and having the template made by someone else took some of the wind out of my sails. I am happy with the end product. It looks cool and is fun to play, but from a process perspective it isn't one of my favorites.

Figure 27: *Scroll Bass,* 2009.

Figure 28: *Scroll Bass,* Scroll detail.

Closing: *Porter's Seven*

This guitar was not part of my graduate exhibition. I have included it because it is representative of my current work. I have been making classical guitars exclusively since my graduate show in November 2009. *Porter's Seven* was made for my good friend John Porter, who has pushed my development as a builder in numerous ways. He has been frank in his assessments and forthcoming with his suggestions. I focused my attention to making concert quality classical guitars because of his support. This is a beautiful instrument, but its visual allure is second to its articulate, expressive tone.

Porter's Seven showcases the skill set that I have developed over these last several years. I started this journey while still struggling to finish a Master's degree in Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology, and have since crafted a career path that is both challenging and rewarding. Lutherie is a fulfilling endeavor. Six years ago I was unsure of which direction I should take. I was scouring woodworking magazines and publications trying to obtain knowledge. Like many, I hoped to find an educator to show me the way. Within a short time, however, I realized that this wasn't a question and answer quest I was on. I really didn't want to be told how to do things. I wanted to fumble my way through so that I could grow as both a craftsman and a person. I entered this MFA program for two reasons. First, I saw it as a means to an end: a way for me to become credentialed so that I could someday work as an educator. Second, I entered the program because it offered me the freedom to explore craft without the usual constraints found in traditional Master's programs. I was encouraged to find a path that worked for me, not necessarily for the betterment of the craft. I guess that sounds a bit brash. Oh well, it is what it is.

Figure 29: *Porter's Seven,* 2010.

Figure 30: *Porter's Seven,* Back.

Figure 31: *Porter's Seven,* Rosette detail.

Figure 32: *Porter's Seven,* Side detail.

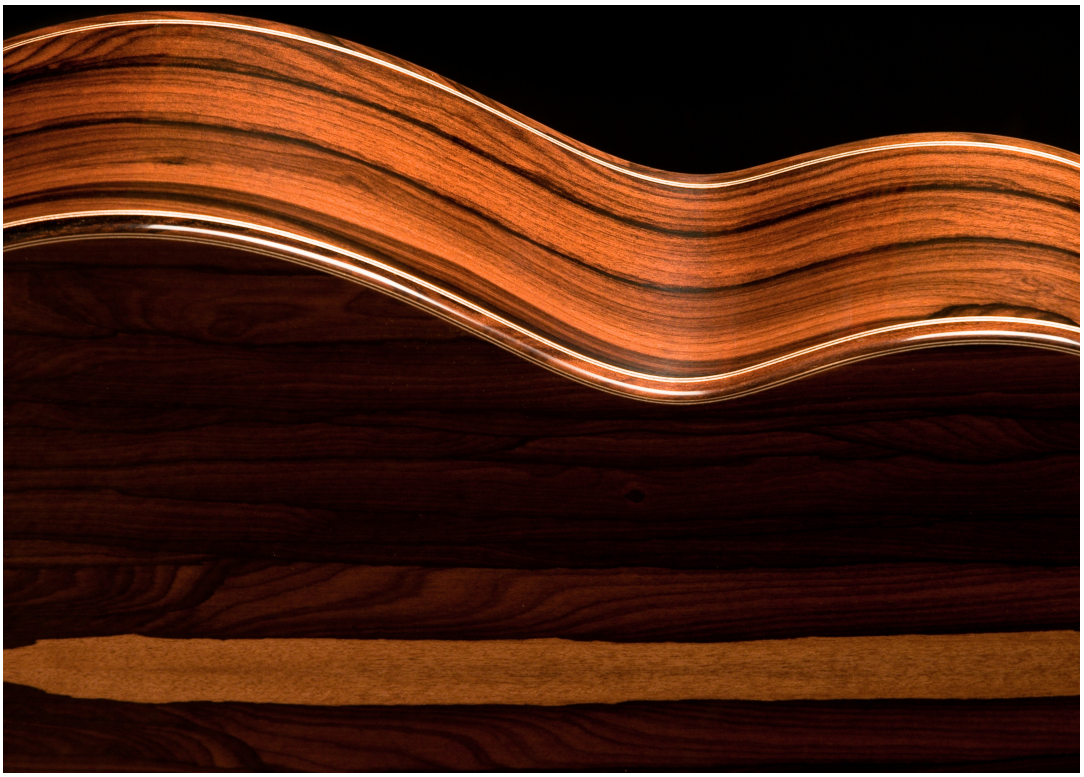

Figure 33: *Porter's Seven,* Binding and side detail.

Figure 34: *Porter's Seven,* Head detail.

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